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Researching the History of HIV/AIDS: An Interview with Christopher Ewing

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An Interview with Christopher Ewing

Can you tell me, in general, about this article you're writing on the AIDS epidemic in West Germany?

It's on HIV/AIDS in West Germany between 1981, which of course is the year that AIDS was first clinically identified in the U.S. and 1992, at which point we see a shift in discourses surrounding HIV/AIDS as well as migration in the Federal Republic of Germany. So I'm looking at HIV/AIDS and how it pertains to gay activism and how gay activists and AIDS activists in that moment discuss migration and race.

What do you see as the greatest challenge for treating HIV/AIDS in the near future?

In the near future I think that it really depends on where we're talking about because those challenges are going to look very different in Virginia than it might look in Berlin. In general, I think a lot has to do with education as well as work among young people. Certainly, in the United States, and I believe also in Germany, there have been reports of increasing new infections of HIV among young people, especially in urban centers and so I think that's going to be a challenge. Also, what we're seeing now in Western Europe is the so called "refugee crisis" which is putting a major strain on Eastern Germany in the structures that have been set up. A lot of activists who are working on this that I've talked to are trying to secure enough funding from the federal government in order to combat the spread of HIV among refugee groups and provide them with the support that they need to combat not only HIV/AIDS but also to create spaces in which people can talk openly and learn about sexuality, STDS, drug use, and things that are related, but maybe not directly related to HIV/AIDS. That's just off the top of my head—of course there are many, many challenges that different groups are facing in terms of combatting the disease.

I had no idea that was a strain put on the community there because of the refugee crisis.

And I think it has more to do with just—I don't know how much you know about how it's set up in Germany as far as preventing the spread of HIV and stigma, but it comes down to an organization that was founded originally in the grassroots organization the German AIDS-Hilfe which has local branches across Germany. So each local branches is kind of dealing with their situation,

intake alone—Dusseldorf, Berlin, Dresden—and each one is trying to figure out what we do, in this moment, given the fact that we see the establishment of new refugee camps and given the fact that we the crowding of those and how we talk about HIV/AIDS that is not only effective, but culturally sensitive. They have people coming from all over the world and I think that's putting a strain on those organizations and you see a lot of really innovative and interesting solutions that are coming out of regional affiliations of the German Aids-Hilfe, however there is always, always, always that question of how we actually finance that.

What motivated you to focus your research on Germany?

It was actually kind of an accident. When I started college, I wanted to study the languages of French and Arabic, and my schedule didn't allow for Arabic and so I was like, "My mother grew up in Germany, my family is from Germany, maybe I'll study German." The language and its history started to intrigue me, particularly the Weimar Republic and the history of homosexuality in that interwar period. One of those great questions for me, early in my college career was, "How does this happen in the 1920s? Why do you see this flourishing of homosexual communities of same sex desire?" That was something that I combined with my interest that emerged in high school with HIV/AIDS at that point in the U.S. So, I wrote my undergrad thesis on the history of HIV/AIDS in the Federal Republic of Germany and built my dissertation that I'm writing currently on that.

Have you experienced any roadblocks in your research?

I think that it can be a little bit difficult just generally speaking writing about the history of race and racism within gay communities pretty much anywhere in Western Europe or North America, and that's certainly the case for Germany. So, while I've met a lot of really wonderful and supportive people in the United States and in Germany, definitely what I'm doing is taken by some to undermine a political project of gay people and more broadly LGBTQ people in Germany by essentially arguing that, yes, there was a tremendous amount of persecution of same-sex desiring people in the history of the Federal Republic and in the history of the Third Reich, at the same time when we look at the period between 1945 and the present, that persecution, that discrimination also comes alongside discrimination of people of color within West German and German gay scenes. Trying to write that history and navigate the politics of that can be challenging. I haven't met any roadblocks in terms of publishing or conducting research, that usually comes more at conferences when I'm presenting my work and it's met with a bit of resistance from maybe one or two people in the audience, but as far as actually going about conducting my research, I've been able to find a tremendous amount of sources because Berlin is really wonderful. They have a gay archive there that has so many things—people keep donating so quickly that they can't even catalogue it. And at the same time, I've been starting to give some oral history interviews with people who are not only sympathetic to my research but

have experience with gay activism and with AIDS activism and how that relates to issues of racism, xenophobia, and migration.

That must be really heartening, especially the oral history part.

Yeah, it really is. I've had some really good experiences where people just really want to tell their stories and tell their perspectives. Of course that can sometimes be a challenge to deal with a historical source because you get emotionally invested in that in a way you don't get when you're just dealing with printed materials, but it is really wonderful to just encounter people who are just generous with their own perspective, who are forthcoming with their own emotions, and really do want to see my work succeed because it in some ways allows them to have their story written down in a way they might not otherwise see.

What applications do you think specifically historical research on HIV/AIDS can have?

I think a lot of it can go to current projects and current discussions about issues surrounding HIV/AIDS and issues surrounding prevention. So, looking at this moment in the 1980s where you see across North America and Western Europe a resurgence of vitriolic homophobia and racism and how those get paired together and then understanding what happened in the 1980s that allowed for a lot of this homophobia to be shut down in favor of very frank discussions about sexuality, of prevention strategies, and sort of untangling that whole history can be very useful in a moment where we see very much a resurgence in open, vehement racism that, while I don't have the empirical data to fairly say, I'm sure is very detrimental to a lot of the goals of preventing HIV/AIDS in marginalized communities. Thinking about that moment for our present moment of how do we build effective coalitions, how do we develop effective prevention strategies, I think can be very, very useful.

It's kind of looking at the theory from that historical moment that you're looking at and seeing how that can apply to issues that we have today.

Yeah, absolutely. There's been a lot of talk right now, and actually among German historians, about the rise of fascism and how did the Weimar democracy collapse, which seems relevant for Trump era politics. I would argue that, yes, we can learn from that moment, but we can also learn from a moment in the early 1990s where, particularly in Germany, we see a string of radical right-wing violence that's aimed at queer people and that's aimed at people who are marked as immigrants. That string of radical, right-wing violence looks a lot like what happened in Charlottesville in 2017 and looks like what's happening all over the country. And in Germany, while coalition building was by no means perfect at all, and is marked by these exclusions, looking to moments like that where we do see similarities in Germany, or in other national contexts, of right wing violence and some sort of effective response and effective alliances

that were built, that can also be really useful in thinking through what do we do now in 2018 when we're also facing violence, when we're also facing repressive administrations, when we're facing all these different challenges that have parallels, albeit imperfect, in different historical and national contexts.

Generally, the sciences and social sciences are considered the most important participants in discussions about HIV/AIDS because they're focused on treatment. Why is it important for the humanities to participate in these conversations?

Especially when we're talking about HIV/AIDS and certainly when we're probably talking about any disease, we absolutely have to be aware of the social context in which the diseases emerge as well as the context in which governmental responses emerge. So, when we're looking at HIV/AIDS, a lot of the questions that came up, even in the 1980s, about how do we, as let's say a government in Western Europe or North America, how do we prevent the spread of HIV were completely tone deaf at best and deeply homophobic and racist at worst in creating responses, responses that were in some cases built on very old and outdated infectious disease prevention measures. It was really activists initially, and then social scientists and humanities scholars slightly later began to formulate different solutions that took into account the lived experiences of people who were dealing with HIV/AIDS, as well as the issues that were brought up by sexual desire, about how do you prevent HIV/AIDS and still account for a validation of certain queer sex practices. I think that the humanities can play a big role in those sorts of discussions and those discussions that really do deal with human experience in a way that wouldn't necessarily come up in virology or epidemiology. And then at the same time, I think formulating political responses that the humanities similarly have a big role to play, thinking about historical strategies and thinking about historical context and thinking about cultural sensitivities—as in the case of the refugee crisis in Germany, formulating responses to HIV/AIDS that also take into account different cultural perspectives and also take into account social contexts. I think that's really important and that's something the humanities can play a very unique role and a very important role in.

We're humanizing this disease so that it's not just in clinical terms.

I think that goes a long way just in individual encounters as well and providing access to prevention and treatment and care, I think it's really important to always have that in mind.

Auctus is an undergraduate research journal. Do you have any advice for undergraduate students trying to research HIV/AIDS?

There are a lot of really wonderful resources there in archives, in people's homes, and there's a lot of work to be done. I think one thing that has

been challenging for me and one thing I think is really important to understand is it's a really tough topic and you're dealing with death, you're dealing with tragedy, you're dealing with grief and especially when you're trying to conduct oral histories that can be difficult. When you're starting that for the first time--I remember when I was starting my undergraduate thesis, it was really emotionally overwhelming in a way that many of my history colleagues' theses weren't—just bearing that in mind and bearing in mind that this is really important research that, even though can be emotionally draining and completely exhausting, it's something that really is so important and I would encourage anybody who's feeling daunted by the task of doing any sort of research on HIV/AIDS from different disciplinary perspectives in the humanities to keep going and find people who are conducting similar research. Just talk informally with them about the challenges because that can be really useful, too.

Can you speak more about your experience conducting research as an undergraduate student?

I've been conducting research primarily in the U.S. and so what I was looking at were digitized sources. I was looking at popular magazines and newspapers from Germany in the 1980s. What that meant was that I was looking at a lot of really sensationalized reporting on HIV/AIDS, on gay sexuality, and on race and immigration. That alone was quite daunting and could also make me sad, but also really deeply angry, especially because the 1980s are really not that far removed and that language they were using is deeply familiar. That was very difficult, but it was also really interesting, at least from a historical standpoint, to chart the development of reporting on HIV/AIDS as well as chart the development of activism surrounding HIV/AIDS and the networks of care that people were able to set up and the ways that really grassroots movements were able to quite effectively combat the social stigma as well as the spread of HIV/AIDS. So, I was working primarily on digitized media sources. One other resource that I found, and it still exists, was, Rochester has a digitized collection of HIV prevention campaigns from all over the world. There are mostly posters, but a few other documents and they're all online, freely accessible and that, of course, includes Germany. I was able to look at the development of how the German AIDS Hilfe developed a visual campaign that attempted to eroticize condom use but attempted to speak very frankly about the many ways in which HIV could be transmitted, in a way that was both frank and respectful of those who were deemed by society, deemed by governments, deemed by doctors to be risk groups. So that was helpful for me, personally, to balance out the whole research project emotionally, but was also a great resource and one that I encourage anyone who is looking at HIV in so many national contexts. That's something you can find relatively easily and those sources are so wonderfully informative.

What other projects related to HIV/AIDS have you done prior to this work on Germany specifically? For example, your role as panel organizer for the conference, Understanding AIDS Activism and Public Health Policy in Europe through Oral History.

That was a really cool project. It was done in collaboration with the group working based out of the Humboldt University in Germany, but is working all over Europe, in Germany and Poland, the UK and Turkey. They're conducting not only oral history interviews, but a range of work on HIV/AIDS in public health across Europe. That was a lot of fun because I was focusing on Europe, but I had colleagues on the panel who were focusing on the UK and on Poland, as somebody who primarily focuses on Germany, that was really informative just to get a timeline of the development of prevention and treatment strategies in different national contexts and how those lined up with Germany. That was actually coming from another conference I did in Switzerland, back in 2016, and that was AIDS, Drugs, and the Entangled Histories of European Public Health Policies since the 1960s. I met a couple of people there who were working on this particular project called the Europe HATCH project. It's an acronym that stands for UROPACH and it stands for Disentangling European HIV/AIDS Policies, Activism, Citizenship, and Health. I met a couple of people who were involved in that project in Switzerland when I gave my presentation that's based on the article that's forthcoming this year. I found the work they were doing to be fascinating. I met up with them a few times when I was in Berlin because that's where they're based and we talked about putting together this panel for the conference that I just came from. That was really wonderful because they have networks all over Europe and they were able to get a group of people who were involved in this project together for this panel to talk about oral histories specifically when discussing HIV/AIDS, public health, and activism in Europe. A lot of the work I've been doing recently has been associated with this project and that's been a wonderful intellectual network to have to discuss the work that I'm doing right now.

Could you speak to the Across the Wall, Across the Wende: Women's and Sexual Rights Activism in East-West Perspective panel and your paper presentation, "The Politics of Stigma: AIDS Activism During the Wende."

That was fantastic. That was a panel that I organized with one colleague in Germany who's looking at gay activism in the 1970s and 1980s in Germany, focusing on West German gay publications, interpretations of East German gay activism—so looking across the Berlin wall at how West German gay people were interpreting East German gay activism—as well as another colleague who was working on sexology and sexual health in East Germany. The paper I presented on was taking the period slightly after the article that I'm publishing now. This is like chapter 5 of my dissertation, it's looking at the period between 1989, so the year the Berlin wall comes down in Berlin, and 2015, the year the so-called refugee crisis really begins. The argument I was trying to make was during this time period, during this twenty-five-year frame, we see a really striking shift in the way

violence is discussed in many gay activist circles in Germany as well as the ways in which xenophobia and racism are discussed. During the early 1990s in this wave of xenophobic and homophobic attacks between 1989 and 1993, the idea is that these attacks were very much linked, and they were coming from right wing nationalists, particularly right-wing nationalists who were located in former East Germany. The right-wing nationalists at that point became the face of anti-gay and xenophobic violence.

However, this really shifts over the course of the 90s and the early 2000s, where we see the right-wing nationalists being replaced by the homophobic and misogynistic men of Turkish origin as the face of antigay violence in the Federal Republic of Germany. My argument was over these last two decades that we see this shift and this shift has to do with increased media reporting on violence perpetrated by people who are marked as immigrants or people who have an "immigration background." This was something that has a longer historical trajectory rooted in shifting understandings of Islam between the 1960s and 1980s. I was showing how we see this shift and why we see this shift and how we arrive at our current moment where it seems that Islam, specifically, is incompatible with supposed Western European sexual freedoms. That was a lot of fun, and also a little bit daunting because it was at that presentation that I got the most pushback since it is so recent and it is dealing with LGBTQ activism over the last two decades and the political projects it's engaged in. I got one person who was very much did not like what I was saying and claimed that, no, Muslims do in fact represent a threat to queer people in Germany and what I was doing was little more than an apologia for Muslim homophobia. SO that was interesting moment. So it was looking at the shift in discourses around Muslims within two activist groups—one, the German AIDS hifle, and two, the Lesbian and Gay Federation in Germany, which over the last twenty years who has really gained a place of prominence.